

Efficient Grading Practices: A Guide for Faculty

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I used ChatGPT and Claude to help me turn the long document of my notes on this research into brief, clear sections of guidance. I also recommend using a LLM to help you draft rubrics for your assignments and to make sure the tone of your feedback in your comment bank is constructive and encouraging.

Efficient Grading Matters to You and Your Students

As class sizes increase and teaching loads remain high, grading can quickly become unsustainable. At the same time, not all grading practices contribute equally to student learning. Although students benefit from frequent low-stakes assessment (Schinske and Tanner 2014), the assessments you use should be intentionally designed, clearly aligned, and purposeful tasks (Hattie and Timperley 2007; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006).

This guide is designed to help you work more efficiently and sustainably without sacrificing the quality of feedback students receive. Drawing on peer-reviewed research in higher education assessment, educational psychology, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and pedagogical practice, the strategies presented here have empirical support for reducing faculty grading time, maintaining or improving student learning outcomes, and making assessment a more purposeful part of the teaching and learning process.

The goal is not simply to grade faster, but to grade more intentionally — to ensure that the time you invest in evaluation produces meaningful learning for students and remains sustainable over a career. As Walvoord and Anderson (2009) have argued, grading should be integrated into course planning from the outset, rather than an afterthought. Approached strategically, your grading can be both efficient and pedagogically powerful.

Efficient grading means doing the most impactful work by aligning assignments directly to key learning outcomes, limiting what you grade, and organizing grading processes to protect your time while maintaining fairness and transparency (Reddy and Andrade 2010; Jonsson and Svingby 2007). This guide's strategic changes to assignment design and feedback activities can both reduce your workload and improve your students' learning outcomes (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Hattie and Timperley 2007; Schinske and Tanner 2014).

Designing Your Assessments

Design Assignments That Are Faster to Grade

Grading efficiency starts with assignment design. Assignments that are unclear, poorly structured, or disconnected from learning goals tend to require more of your time responding to confused submissions and grade disputes. In addition, some formats are more time-intensive than others without yielding better learning.

For practice with core concepts and skills, you can shift some assessments to in-class activities or auto-graded quizzes in Canvas. Frequent, low-stakes assignments can improve learning while—perhaps counter-intuitively—reducing your grading load compared to fewer high-stakes tasks (Schinske and Tanner 2014). Larger assignments can be divided into scaffolded pieces by assigning preliminary work for some sections (e.g., annotated bibliographies for lit reviews, outlines for results, concept maps for discussion), perhaps even instead of those completed products. You can also replace some written work with more process-oriented assessments (e.g., annotations on readings or outlines, concept maps). These moves will help you reserve your feedback and time for more complex and integrative work (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006).

Also, staggering high-feedback and low-feedback assignments can distribute your workload more evenly across the semester while still providing students with meaningful formative support.

Use Clear Deadline and Revision Policies

Policies governing late work, resubmissions, and extra credit may seem like administrative details, but they have a direct and measurable impact on your grading workload. Ambiguous or overly permissive policies create ongoing grading demands throughout the semester — a steady stream of late submissions, renegotiated deadlines, and multiple rounds of resubmission that can be difficult to track and time-consuming to manage. Establishing clear, transparent policies at the start of the course, and communicating them explicitly in your syllabus, significantly reduces these downstream pressures (Walvoord and Anderson 2009).

Research on resubmission policies offers a useful benchmark for design decisions. Carpenter (2016) found that unlimited resubmission policies can substantially increase grading time, while limited, rubric-guided resubmission (i.e., allowing one revision within a defined window) adds only modest time while producing meaningful learning benefits. This suggests a practical principle: if your course includes revision opportunities, structure them carefully. Specify the number of allowed resubmissions, require students to submit a brief written reflection identifying what they changed and why, limit revisions to specific criteria (e.g., argument, use of evidence), and anchor resubmissions to the original rubric so you are not re-evaluating the work from scratch.

Similarly, a consistent late work policy, such as a defined penalty per day or a no-late-work rule with a small number of dropped assignments, removes the need for case-by-case negotiation and applies equally to all students, supporting both your workload and your grading fairness.

Create Effective Rubrics

Rubrics are strong, efficient grading tools *when used well*. They can reduce decision fatigue, improve consistency across students, and clarify expectations upfront (Dawson 2017; Nicol, Thomson, and Breslin 2014). They can also reduce repeated commenting by directly embedding common criteria and performance descriptors (Reddy and Andrade 2010). When students understand what's expected of them in advance, their submissions tend to be

better calibrated to those expectations, which reduces the volume of your feedback and the time you spend on grading (Sadler 2009).

What does “using rubrics well” mean? As you write your rubrics, avoid over-complexity by limiting criteria to what truly matters (Panadero and Jonsson 2013). For some assignments, a single-point rubric that lists the criteria for proficiency in a single column—without separate descriptions for each performance level—may be sufficient. In this simpler form, you’d note only where a student falls short of or exceeds that standard. Single-point rubrics take very little time to develop, can communicate expectations clearly, and can significantly reduce grading time. For more complex assignments, using analytic rubrics (i.e., those with separate rows for key criteria and three to four performance levels and concise descriptions [Jonsson and Svingby 2007]) will guide students effectively while also helping you grade more quickly. You can then circle, highlight, or tick descriptions on the rubric—rather than writing full prose comments for every criterion—and then add one global comment pointing to one or two priorities for improvement (Hattie and Timperley 2007). Anchoring your rubric with examples even more effectively supports students’ internalization of your expectations and can reduce clarification emails and grade disputes (Jonsson and Svingby 2007). Using rubrics well also means refining them across semesters as you learn what’s clear to both you and the students, and what’s not. See the “[Building Better Rubrics](#)” for more help with creating your rubrics.

Holistic grading—assigning an overall score based on quality—can be used for drafts, low-stakes work, or early iterations.

Reduce Grading Volume Without Reducing Learning

More grading doesn’t necessarily lead to more learning. Research is sobering on this point: Schinske and Tanner (2014) cite evidence that detailed commentary on papers may achieve no learning gain if comments are rarely read by students. Excessive grading can overwhelm students, make students disengage from your feedback, and increase your workload without added benefit.

Consider where you can use simple check/plus/minus or completion grades rather than detailed grading for every submission (Gibbs and Simpson 2004; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006). For assignments designed primarily to encourage engagement and practice (e.g., reading responses, informal reflections, weekly problem sets), completion-based (or effort-based) grading dramatically reduces your grading time while maintaining student motivation. Schinske and Tanner (2014) document that awarding credit for completion of work, rather than grading for accuracy, can sustain student interest in improvement. Your role then shifts from evaluating each submission in detail to spot-checking for genuine engagement. To help students understand your approach, be transparent with them about what you’ll grade for practice and process and what you’ll grade closely for the quality of their final product.

For surface-level features (e.g., grammar, formatting), you can simply mark a sample paragraph and ask students to apply those corrections throughout the rest of the document (Bean and Melzer 2021).

You can also focus on one or two targeted criteria (e.g., evidence, argument) for specific sections or early drafts, rather than full-scale feedback (Hattie and Timperley 2007).

Class-level feedback after major assignments can highlight common strengths and areas for improvement, helping you avoid retyping the same comment on many papers (Bean and Melzer 2021; Hattie and Timperley 2007), and then you can supplement with one or two individualized comments per student (Bart 2009).

Audio and video feedback may allow you to communicate feedback more efficiently than typing. Speaking feedback aloud may also allow you to provide more nuanced, personalized commentary in less time than writing the equivalent commentary (Bart 2009).

Coordinating Grading in Multi-Section and Large Courses

Where multiple sections or graders are involved, coordination significantly improves grading efficiency and fairness across a program (Jonsson and Svingby 2007), and common tools and shared practices reduce rework, appeals, and inconsistencies that lead to extra grading time (Panadero and Jonsson 2013). You can coordinate this work across sections by creating shared assignment prompts and rubrics with explicit guidance on weighting and interpretation of criteria (Panadero and Jonsson 2013). Holding brief norming meetings where all graders apply the rubric to sample papers, compare scores, and discuss rationales to prepare all graders and increase inter-grader reliability (Jonsson and Svingby 2007).

Providing Feedback

Focus on Feedback That Guides Learning (and Skip What Doesn't)

An important conceptual point is that grading and feedback are not the same thing, and feedback (not grading) is what primarily promotes student learning. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) argue that the traditional model, in which the instructor transmits evaluative information to students after the fact, deprives students of opportunities to develop as self-regulated learners. Instead, feedback is most effective when it helps students understand how to improve, not just how they performed, and providing feedback that students can act on helps them narrow the gap between where they are and where they need to be—and recognize that difference (Hattie and Timperley 2007). This distinction encourages you to think differently about how to distribute your evaluative effort. For instance, you can focus your feedback by prioritizing actionable comments over exhaustive comments or annotations, addressing patterns (e.g., two or three key issues) rather than marking every error, and emphasizing next steps. Building opportunities for students to revise, requiring reflection on feedback before subsequent assignments, and asking students to describe what they changed based on prior feedback shifts your feedback from a one-time event that students may never use to part of a cycle of learning (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006).

Also, not every assignment needs to receive the same type or depth of feedback: some assignments are best treated as low-stakes learning activities with minimal feedback, and others—particularly those that precede major assessments—warrant targeted, substantive feedback that students have time to apply.

Create Comment Banks for Reusable Feedback

There are probably plenty of comments that you provide many students, perhaps even across multiple courses. Creating a comment bank of these reusable responses can dramatically reduce your grading time. You can also pair comment banks with brief personalized notes of no more than two sentences.

The next time you grade, start building a library of the common phrases you write, organize them by assignment or rubric criteria, and then simply copy and paste them into your feedback. Since you're not writing these comments every time you grade, you can also revise them over time to make them as clear, concise, and action oriented as possible. In the end, the consistency and clarity of your feedback are more important than novelty (Henderson et al. 2021).

Manage Your Grading Time

Grading is cognitively demanding work that suffers from fatigue effects. Your grading will be more consistent and efficient when done in focused sessions rather than scattered across the day (Walvoord and Anderson 2009). Schedule dedicated blocks to treat grading with the same intentionality as scheduled office hours or class preparation, rather than allowing it to expand into available gaps. Walvoord and Anderson (2009) recommend keeping a grading log for at least one semester to understand how you actually distribute your grading time.

As you grade, set explicit time limits per assignment to reduce grading fatigue (Carpenter 2016). Batching similar tasks (e.g., grading all introductions, then all conclusions) and using short, repeated grading sessions rather than long periods of grading improve both speed and consistency (Carpenter 2016).

Use Peer & Self-Assessment

One of the most powerful (and underused) strategies is redistributing feedback work, rather than treating it as a one-directional transmission from you to the students. Students are already assessing their own work and generating internal feedback, so you can build on this practice and improve its accuracy through peer and self-assessment activities (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006). In addition to reducing your grading load (Huisman et al. 2019), peer and self-assessment have been shown to improve student learning outcomes, develop their evaluative judgment, and build metacognitive skills (i.e., students' awareness of their own learning), which has long-term benefits beyond any single assignment (Schinske and Tanner 2014). When supported by clear criteria and training, students can provide feedback that is moderately reliable and pedagogically valuable, while reducing your grading load (Topping 1998; Falchikov and Goldfinch 2000). When they assess a peer's work, students apply the evaluative criteria in ways that strengthen their own understanding, often learning as much as or more than the students receiving feedback (Nicol, Thomson, and Breslin 2014).

To support peer- and self-assessment, begin with lower-stakes assignments to help students develop feedback skills, and consider having them submit a brief self-reflection with any peer-reviewed work. Use clear criteria with rubrics and exemplars, write specific and structured prompts (not “provide feedback”), and make this work “count” by assigning points to this important part of their learning process. These points can even be assessed by the students themselves: a brief rubric for draft completion and quality of feedback will guide students in evaluating their own and their classmates' feedback activities.

Leverage Canvas's Tools

Canvas tools can support many of the efficient grading practices described in this guide by streamlining both feedback delivery and communication. SpeedGrader allows you to use rubrics, annotations, and comments in one place. Canvas also makes it easier to provide class-level feedback through announcements or discussion posts, which can reduce repetitive commenting across individual submissions.

Using these tools intentionally can help you standardize your feedback processes, save time, and ensure that students receive clear, accessible responses to their work. When paired with well-designed assignments and rubrics, Canvas can function not just as a grading platform, but as a system that supports efficient and effective feedback practices. Learn how to use these tools by visiting the [“Providing Effective Student Feedback”](#) guide.

Conclusion

Efficient grading isn't about reducing your investment in students' learning, but about directing that investment where it has the greatest impact. By designing assignments with grading in mind, clarifying expectations, focusing feedback on what students can use, and building structures that support consistency and sustainability, you can make grading a more manageable and meaningful part of your teaching.

Over time, these practices can help you shift from *reacting to* grading demands to *shaping* them, creating courses in which assessment supports learning without overwhelming your time and energy. In this way, efficient grading is not simply a set of strategies, but an approach to teaching that aligns your effort with what matters most for student learning.

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